

MYTH MAN'S HOMEWORK HELP CENTER

## ECHO & NARCISSUS



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Zeus, the King of the Olympians, was known for his many love affairs. Sometimes the young and beautiful Nymph Echo would distract and amuse his wife Hera with long and entertaining stories, while Zeus took advantage of the moment to ravish the other mountain nymphs. When Hera discovered the trickery she punished the talkative Echo by taking away her voice, except in foolish repetition of another's shouted words. Thus, all Echo could do was repeat the voice of another.

Echo fell in love with a vain youth named Narcissus, who was the son of the blue Nymph Leiriope of Thespia. The River god Cephisus had once encircled Leirope with the windings of his streams, and thus trapping her, had seduced the nymph. Narcissus was their child.

Concerned about the baby's welfare, Leirope went to consult the oracle called Teiresias regarding her son's future. Teiresias told the nymph that Narcissus "would live to a ripe old age, as long as he never knew himself."

Narcissus was beautiful as a child and grew even more so as he matured. By the age of sixteen he had left a trail of broken hearts, from rejected lovers of both sexes. Narcissus wanted nothing to do with falling in love with anyone and rebuffed all attempts at romance.

One day when Narcissus was out hunting stags, Echo

stealthily followed the handsome youth through the woods, longing to address him but unable to speak first. When Narcissus finally heard footsteps and shouted "Who's there?", Echo answered "Who's there?" And so it went, until finally Echo showed herself and rushed to embrace the lovely youth.

He pulled away from the nymph and vainly told her to get lost. Narcissus left Echo heartbroken and she spent the rest of her life in lonely glens, pining away for the love she never knew, until only her voice remained.

A man named Ameinius was one of Narcissus' most ardent admirers, and repeatedly vied for his attention. The conceited youth responded by sending his suitor a sword, telling him to prove his adoration. Ameinius proceeded to plunge the sword into his heart, committing suicide to demonstrate his love, but not before he beseeched the gods to punish the vain Narcissus.

The goddess of the hunt, Artemis, heard the plea and made Narcissus fall in love, but a kind a love that couldn't be fulfilled. Narcissus came upon a clear spring at Donacon in Thespia and, as he bent low to take a drink, for the first time caught sight of himself reflected in the pool. Try as he might to touch this exquisite person in the waters, however, he never could.



For hours he sat enraptured by the spring, at last recognizing himself but tortured by the realization that he could never possess the object of his infatuation. Narcissus was tormented, much as he had tormented all those who in the past had been unlucky enough to fall in

love with him.

Finally unable to stand the agony Narcissus plunged a dagger in his heart and died, calling out a last goodbye to his reflected image. Where his blood soaked the earth sprung up the white narcissus flower with its red corollary.

### (Short Greek version)

Echo was a very beautiful and musical nymph who could sing sweetly and expertly play many instruments. She lived deep in the woods and denied the love of any mortal or god. She therefore attracted the hatred and anger of many, including the god Pan whose love she turned down. Pan caused his followers the shepherds to kill Echo and tear her to pieces that were subsequently scattered far and wide. Gaea, Mother Earth, received the pieces in her bosom and thus Echo, scattered now all over the earth, retained her voice and talents answering or imitating every sound or voice.

## **ECHO & NARCISSUS BY THOMAS BULLFINCH**

Echo was a beautiful nymph, fond of the woods and hills, where she devoted herself to woodland sports. She was a favourite of Diana, and attended her in the chase. But Echo had one failing; she was fond of talking, and whether in chat or argument, would have the last word. One day Juno was seeking her husband, who, she had reason to fear, was amusing himself among the nymphs. Echo by her talk contrived to detain the goddess till the nymphs made their escape. When Juno discovered it, she passed sentence upon Echo in these words: "You shall forfeit the use of that tongue with which you have cheated me, except for that one purpose you are so fond of- reply. You shall still have the last word, but no power to speak first."

This nymph saw Narcissus, a beautiful youth, as he pursued the chase upon the mountains. She loved him and followed his footsteps. O how she longed to address him in the softest accents, and win him to converse! but it was not in her power. She waited with impatience for him to speak first, and had her answer ready. One day the youth, being separated from his companions,

shouted aloud, "Who's here?" Echo replied, "Here." Narcissus looked around, but seeing no one, called out, "Come." Echo answered, "Come." As no one came, Narcissus called again, "Why do you shun me?" Echo asked the same question. "Let us join one another," said the youth. The maid answered with all her heart in the same words, and hastened to the spot, ready to throw her arms about his neck. He started back, exclaiming, "Hands off! I would rather die than you should have me!" "Have me," said she; but it was all in vain. He left her, and she went to hide her blushes in the recesses of the woods. From that time forth she lived in caves and among mountain cliffs. Her form faded with grief, till at last all her flesh shrank away. Her bones were changed into rocks and there was nothing left of her but her voice. With that she is still ready to reply to any one who calls her, and keeps up her old habit of having the last word.

Narcissus's cruelty in this case was not the only instance. He shunned all the rest of the nymphs, as he had done poor Echo. One day a maiden who had in vain endeavored to attract him uttered a prayer that he might some time or other feel what it was to love and meet no return of affection. The avenging goddess heard and granted the prayer.

There was a clear fountain, with water like silver, to which the shepherds never drove their flocks, nor the mountain goats resorted, nor any of the beasts of the forests; neither was it defaced with fallen leaves or branches; but the grass grew fresh around it, and the rocks sheltered it from the sun. Hither came one day the youth, fatigued with hunting, heated and thirsty. He stooped down to drink, and saw his own image in the water; he thought it was some beautiful water-spirit living in the fountain. He stood gazing with admiration at those bright eyes, those locks curled like the locks of Bacchus or Apollo, the rounded cheeks, the ivory neck, the parted lips, and the glow of health and exercise over all. He fell in love with himself. He brought his lips near to take a kiss; he plunged his arms in to embrace the beloved object. It fled at the touch, but returned again after a moment and renewed the fascination. He could not tear himself away; he lost all thought of food or rest. while he hovered over the brink of the fountain gazing upon his own image. He talked with the supposed spirit: "Why, beautiful being, do you shun me? Surely my face is not one to repel you. The nymphs love me, and you

yourself look not indifferent upon me. When I stretch forth my arms you do the same; and you smile upon me and answer my beckonings with the like." His tears fell into the water and disturbed the image. As he saw it depart, he exclaimed, "Stay, I entreat you! Let me at least gaze upon you, if I may not touch you." With this, and much more of the same kind, he cherished the flame that consumed him, so that by degrees he lost his colour, his vigour, and the beauty which formerly had so charmed the nymph Echo.



She kept near him, however, and when he exclaimed, "Alas! alas!" she answered him with the same words. He pined away and died; and when his shade passed the Stygian river, it leaned over the boat to catch a look of itself in the waters. The nymphs mourned for him, especially the water-nymphs; and when they smote their breasts Echo smote hers also. They prepared a funeral pile and would have burned the body, but it was nowhere to be found; but in its place a flower, purple within, and surrounded with white leaves, which bears the name and preserves the memory of Narcissus.

Milton alludes to the story of Echo and Narcissus in the Lady's song in "Comus." She is seeking her brothers in the forest, and sings to attract their attention:

**"Sweet Echo, sweetest nymph, that liv'st unseen  
Within thy aery shell  
By slow Meander's margent green,  
And in the violet-embroidered vale,  
Where the love-lorn nightingale  
Nightly to thee her sad song mourneth well;**

**Canst thou not tell me of a gentle pair  
That likest thy Narcissus are?  
O, if thou have  
Hid them in some flowery cave,  
Tell me but where,  
Sweet queen of parly, daughter of the sphere,  
So may'st thou be translated to the skies,  
And give resounding grace to all heaven's  
harmonies."**

Milton has imitated the story of Narcissus in the account which he makes Eve give of the first sight of herself reflected in the fountain.

**"That day I oft remember when from sleep  
I first awaked, and found myself reposed  
Under a shade on flowers, much wondering where  
And what I was, whence thither brought, and how  
Not distant far from thence a murmuring sound  
Of waters issued from a cave, and spread  
Into a liquid plain, then stood unmoved  
Pure as the expanse of heaven; I thither went  
With unexperienced thought, and laid me down  
On the green bank, to look into the clear  
Smooth lake that to me seemed another sky.  
As I bent down to look, just opposite  
A shape within the watery gleam appeared,  
Bending to look on me. I started back;  
It started back; but pleased I soon returned,  
Pleased it returned as soon with answering looks  
Of sympathy and love. There had I fixed  
Mine eyes till now, and pined with vain desire,  
Had not a voice thus warned me: 'What thou seest,  
What there thou seest, fair creature, is thyself;" etc.  
[Paradise Lost, Book IV]**

No one of the fables of antiquity has been oftener alluded to by the poets than that of Narcissus. Here are two epigrams which treat it in different ways. The first is by Goldsmith:

**ON A BEAUTIFUL YOUTH, STRUCK BLIND BY  
LIGHTNING**

**"Sure 'twas by Providence designed  
Rather in pity than in hate,  
That he should be like Cupid blind,  
To save him from Narcissus' fate."**

The other is by Cowper:

**ON AN UGLY FELLOW**

**"Beware, my friend, of crystal brook  
Or fountain, lest that hideous hook,  
Thy nose, thou chance to see;  
Narcissus' fate would then be thine,  
And self-detested thou would'st pine,  
As self-enamoured he."**

